RUSSIA'S ISLE OF CONVICT PENS

Saghalien, Which Japanese May Capture.

An Island Which Russia Cannot Now Defend.

The following article, written last April, gives a good idea of the island of Saghalien which Japan may recover from Russia.

London, April 3, 1901.

From the colony of Russian exiles in London one gets a definite idea that a great revolution is brewing in Russia—greater than the bloody attempt of the '70's, that ended in the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. The working classes are interested to some extent this time, whereas they took little part in the previous affair. Just now the smoldering flames are being fanned by news that is leaking out from Russia's mysterious "Ile du Diable," a place guarded more closely and less known than the bit of land on which Dreyfus was penned and on which every encouragement to die was given to him.

Russia's "Ile du Diable" is Saghalin, sometimes spelled Sakhalin, or Saghalien, and it appears that it is now the most frightful place on earth where the cruelty, wickedness and wretchedness that once were spread over Siberia under the old Siberian convict system were concentrated chiefly when Russia "abolished" that system. The "abolition" consisted largely in getting the horror out of sight, where travelers like George Kennan could not see it and tell the world about it. London happens to be the best place in which to find out some of the facts about Saghalin, for the metropolis and its suburbs contain the largest gathering of Russian exiles, free to speak their minds, that can be found anywhere. They are watched closely by the police, and any one of them who goes to experimenting with chemicals is put down forthwith in "Melville's books," that is, is placed under the keen observation of the Scotland Yard police inspector whose special province is dynamiters.

This desolate island to which Russian convicts are now exported, looks on the map to be scarcely a stone's throw to the southeast down the Bering sea and the sea of Okhotsk from Alaska. It is less than fifty years since Saghalin was occupied, 30 since the first batch of convicts was sent there, 25 since the southern part of the island was taken over from Japan, and 20 since deportation on a large scale began. In 1884 the penal business had become so great that a governor with full executive staff had to be sent out from St. Petersburg and the island to be divided into three administrative districts. At first the convict parties were sent overland, and the greater part of the way on foot—an incredible journey of between 4000 and 5000 miles, and cases are on record of men who survived this journey, escaped from prison after it, and made their way right across Siberia to European Russia, only to be captured there and sent back again. Soon, however, land transportation was abandoned, and the convicts were shipped in periodical batches by steamers of the so-called volunteer fleet (Dobrovolny Flott) by way of Odessa and the Suez canal. The wretched condition of this traffic drew much public attention in the early '80's, and afterward a better type of vessel was built. Several years ago the rumor that one of these prison ships—fitted with cages for the prisoners and a hose arrangement by which they can be boiled alive with steam in case of mutiny—was being built on the Clyde roused a good deal of feeling in England. The vessels carry 800 prisoners 'tween decks, and only twenty are allowed on deck at a time in fine weather.

Exile to Saghalin, like exile to Siberia before it, had in the eyes of the Russian government three objects. The first, of course, was to get rid in the easiest and most effective way of real criminals and inconvenient people who to the autocracy are the worst kind of criminals—political agitators. The second was the profitable working of the coal mines of the island. The third was agricultural colonization. The first of these ends has been achieved so completely that a man or woman deported thither is lost to the world. "All hope abandon, ye who enter here" might in literal truth be written over the portal of this hermetically-sealed island. In its second object the Czar's government has been less successful, for the coal is of poor quality, convict labor is not cheap and markets are far distant. In the third object it has failed completely, and this failure is the best indication of the cruel lot of those who are condemned to existence amid this abomination of desolation. Except for a few weeks of uncertain midsummer sunshine, the island is ice-bound and fog-bound, the climate is harsh; even in June the hills are covered with snow and the soil is frozen 20 inches deep; dwarf forests cover the mountains, and the valleys, with few exceptions, are narrow and marshy; roads are made and kept with great difficulty; there are no good harbors. The hovels of the few settlers who try to make a living out of the icy soil are depicted by Dr. Tchekhov as being like the dens of wild beasts. The whole population depends upon the government allowances of food.

No breeze of culture or freedom ever reaches this terrible place. Even in St. Petersburg public opinion is not strong, and official outrages are frequent. What happens in the dead isolation of the Saghalin prisons, 5000 miles away, where the jailer is more nearly supreme and unfettered than perhaps on any other spot on earth, cannot be told in full. Every year or two some hint of scandal or atrocity leaks out—Prince Kropotkin mentions a doctor who wrote, alluding to the Korsakoff hospital, on the south coast: "My colleague abandons his post; he can no longer bear all that is going on there. The chief of the settlement seldom visits the barracks, he does not appear otherwise than surrounded by armed warders. The governor of the prison dare not appear among the convicts." An account in a St. Petersburg paper, which shortly was suppressed, of disorders discovered by the commander of the Russian Pacific squadron, shows that the poorer convicts were compelled to do the heaviest labor in chains, rich criminals being kept in a privileged position and hobnobbing with the authorities. A few years ago news reached London through Odessa from East Siberia that so terrible a state of affairs was prevalent on the island that the governor had to interfere for the protection of prisoners against minor prison officials.

Several convicts were said deliberately to have maimed themselves to get free of certain cruel wardens. "Others fled into the impenetrable forest"—so the message ran—"where they suffered all the horrors of hunger. In a satchel belonging to a fugitive convict who had been hunted down was found some pieces of human flesh; and other cases of cannibalism have been reported." Such escapes sometimes are successful, the convicts getting across the narrow strip of sea to the mainland in a boat or on a rough raft, but more frequently the wretched fellows are captured by the savage natives,—Gilyaks or Ainos, who receive a regular reward from the government,—or are drowned or die of starvation. By a strange coincidence this news was reported almost simultaneously with the appearance in English of Korolenko's "The Saghalin Convict," which is the story of a successful escape, full of terror and pathos. The reality is again more strange than the fiction; not even Korolenko, with all his grim power, dare give to his readers that ghastly satchel of human flesh. Yet there is more than one well-attested story of cannibalism on Sagahalin.

It must be remembered in every aspect of the Russian penal system that those who have been tried and those who have had no trial, burly ruffians and delicate victims of culture and conscience, the murderer and the gentle sectary, the adulterer and the political propagandist, men, women and mere children, are treated under it almost indiscriminately, unless they have money enough to bribe the jailers. By a decree issued in 1888 to the governor of Saghalin, corporal punishment was reimposed in the case of political offenders—men or women. "No difference must be admitted," it was ordered, between the political offender and the common malefactor; "flogging and the plet must be allowed." This decree soon was put into effect, the first known victims being the "political" named Volney and two of his fellows, who interceded for him with the district commander. A companion who witnessed the flogging wrote: "You will ask why have we not protested by fighting to the death and let ourselves be killed was impossible. We were chained hand and foot and each of us was surrounded by a body of soldiers. Before the execution of the sentence we were kept separated and knew nothing of each other. Perhaps you will ask how we can live after undergoing such ignominy. To this question I will answer by silence."

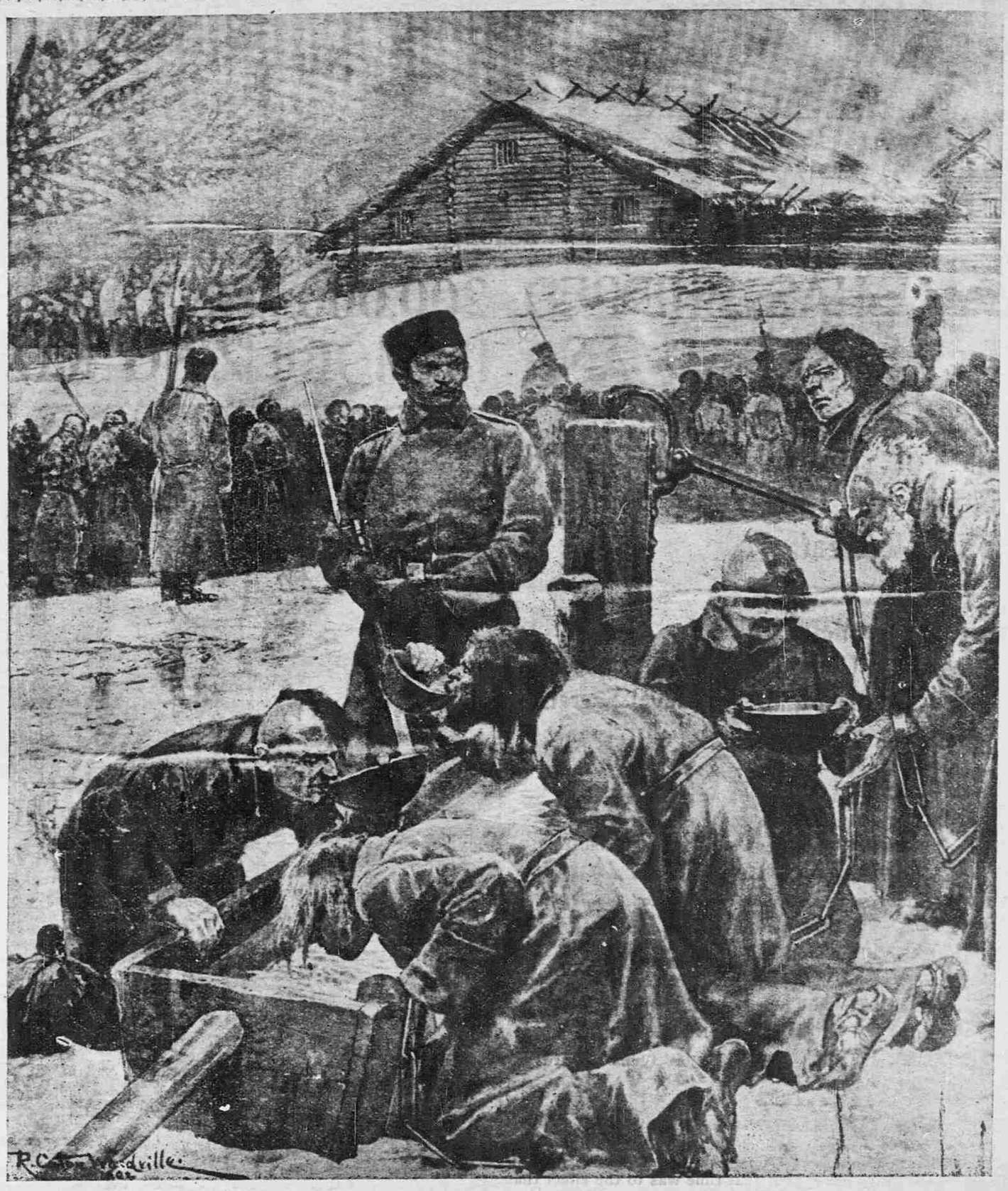
Silence still broods over the Russian Ile du Diable; but every now and then a shriek of agony, as it were, pierces to the outside world. In his book on "Life Among Trans-Siberian Savages," Mr. Howard speaks of "the vague terror which, all through Russia and even in the mines of Siberia, is inspired by the appalling and almost prohibited mention of 'Saghalin!' !! This is substantially true, but the word and something more are to be found occasionally in print. Dr. Tchekhov's reference to "cruel corporal punishment" escaped the censor, and, under the guise of cold history, an account of the flogging of convicts, with illustrations by a former exile, Miroluboy, has just appeared in a Russian historical review. Tolstoi's "Resurrection" produced one of those little revelations so much material for which lies suppressed in Russian society. In a Russian weekly paper, the Physician (Vrach), a certain Dr. Radakoff objected that Tolstoi had exaggerated the cruelty of prison life, whereupon a correspondent signing himself "A Saghalin surgeon," entered upon a defense of the great novelist. "Dr. Radakoff," he said, "is disgusted by the picture given by Tolstoi of a female prisoner giving birth to a child while in the train, which he thinks is nothing but an invention of the author. But what would he say if such facts as these were mentioned to him, namely: That quite recently a woman who was enciente was subjected to flogging at Saghalin? Or that enciente women not infrequently are sent to the remotest and most deserted parts of Saghalin, where there is scarcely any communication at all, and where there can be absolutely no possibility of getting any medical assistance whatever?" Even Harry de Windt, an apologist for the Russian government, speaks of punishment by the birch and plet (a horrible loaded whip), by chaining to a wheelbarrow, and imprisonment in special penitentiary cells. The discipline of the two chief jails he describes as "extremely severe, far more so than in any Siberian prison;" punishment by the "plet" as "a terribly severe one, worse even than the now abolished 'knout'!" A second attempt to escape usually is punished by being chained for a year to a wheelbarrow.

The latest news from Saghalin has just come to London from two Russian journals which are subject to the press censorship. They are the Priamursk Viedomosti and the Amurski Krai, published in the Amur province of Eastern Siberia, and are nearer to the scenes described than any other papers of any importance. According to the Viedomosti, the chief of one of the Saghalin prisons is "a demon who for 14 years past has abused his office by his barbarous ill-treatment of the prisoners of both sexes under his charge." The Russian correspondent goes on to say that "Russian travelers through Saghalin relate with horror the maltreatment of male and female prisoners to which they have been eyewitnesses in many of the insular prisons, and it may reasonably be taken for granted that they were not permitted to see the worst. Every day some of these unhappy deportes, without any adequately just cause, are flogged barbarously. Female convicts, young and old, are beaten with whips and fists, and kicked for the slightest infraction or negligence of their duties, and frequently for no cause whatever. Men and women after such brutal handling, may not be admitted to the lazarettos without the orders of the chiefs who have ill-used and crippled them."

Another prison chief in the south of the island, says the Amurski Krai, has an equally evil reputation. Recently, and for some trivial fault, this man struck a convict so heavily and repeatedly that his victim was made insensible. The chief then called a warder to remove the convict to the cells and this command was executed by placing a lasso around the neck of the insensible victim and thus dragging him away, with the result that he was strangled. Chiefs and warders carry lassoes for similar purposes.

But the worst is yet to come. Here is the statement from the Amurski Krai: "On the arrival of a party of female deportes from European Russia the single women are assembled in a large barrack room. The bachelor convicts are then admitted in turn to choose their partners, who are compelled to mate with the murderers and others who may select them, and forthwith are married and quartered as husbands and wives. Some of the younger and better looking of the female convicts are exempted from this public matrimonial selection for reasons which will not bear inquiring into." This is not the first inkling that has reached the West of this last depth of infamy, for the Dr. Tchekhov, above quoted, told of it as far back as eight years ago.

There was a discussion on Heredity in the Problem Club last night.



SAGHALIEN—THE RUSSIAN CONVICT SETTLEMENT.